GOTHIC ETHICS:  
SEEING THE BEAST IN OUR OWN EYE  
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Monstrous Pedagogues  

Can a monster story teach us something about morality? Can such a tale be a parable holding up a funhouse mirror to the beast lurking in our own hearts? Can it uncover the evil within us that makes fiends and scapegoats of our neighbors? I think it can, and my purpose here is to show how three classic monster stories do just that.

Recommending monster stories as a tool for teaching about moral evil feels unseemly, even perilous, like bringing Carrie to the ball. When a moral theologian like Anne Patrick employs fiction, she introduces us to George Eliot, Graham Greene and Iris Murdoch. Richard Gula offers up passages from Mark Twain, Robert Bolt and Carlos Fuentes. Robert McAfee Brown gives us Samuel Becket, Albert Camus and Alice Walker. What are Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde, and Dracula doing in company such as this?

For a monster story is a beast. Like the misshapen maniacs trolling the caverns and graveyards of these tales of the crypt, the hunchbacked stepchild of the Gothic novel is an ogre inhabiting literature’s nether regions. The overgrown prose has been written by a hand with too many fingers. The razor thin characters barely muster a shadow. The plots have the predictability of a McDonald’s floor plan. And the ghoulish violence has us rubbernecking like voyeurs at a train wreck.

Greeted by many critics and literati with the same revulsion Victor Frankenstein felt for his own “monstrous” creation, these crude “penny dreadfuls” and “shilling shockers” lack the “sense and sensibilities” of serious fiction or the conscience of the social novel. Their single talent is bringing the hairs of our scalp to a standing salute and sending our pulse stampeding over the horizon. A monster story is a creature fashioned to evoke horror, a brute built to rip out our heart and pummel the poor thing senseless on the basement floor.

Nor are such unseemly beasts without their perils. Like Dracula and the werewolf, a
monster tale can infect us with its venomous bite. For the horror story’s “pornography of violence” not only terrifies; it also excites and seduces, transforming us into voyeurs eager to sample its gory wares. Invited to run with the murderous fiend and the raging mob that pursues him, readers and viewers of such tales can become accessories to this celebration of mayhem. And if served an ample diet of such “creature features,” there is a danger of being poisoned by their violent and paranoid vision, a risk of seeing and treating others as monsters.¹ We hear often enough how such fictions fuel the violent fantasies of lonely and disturbed adolescents who walk into school cafeterias armed for Armageddon. And more than one cultural critic has argued that such violent tales contribute to our national obsession with treating violent criminals as monsters.²

Scared Straight

Still, even a beast can teach us something about right and wrong, and – unlike ghoulish “creature features” and slasher films - classic horror novels like Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde and Dracula (but not most of their movie versions) have a sharp moral vision and a distinctive pedagogy.³ Stephen King, who should know a thing or two about this genre, thinks that these tales “are not much different from the morality plays of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”⁴ The central characters often behave very badly, violating the ethical norms of their community and ignoring the sage advice of their elders. But in the moral universe of the monster story no sin goes unpunished. Miscreants, malefactors and mad scientists suffer for their misdeeds, usually in a manner so terrifying that it scares readers senseless - or perhaps we should say sense-full.

Unlike Butler’s Lives of the Saints or William Bennett’s The Book of Virtues, monster stories do not teach morality by holding up paragons and heroes to emulate, but by erecting scarecrows that will frighten audiences into keeping to the straight and narrow. These horror tales teach by scaring us, like parents telling stories about children who accepted rides from strangers. As such, the pedagogy of these Gothic horrors is not so different from a moral theology that for centuries sought to “deliver us from evil” by warning about the pains of hell
and purgatory. Like traditional “fire and brimstone” sermons, monster stories use fear to awaken us to moral dangers and threats we might have otherwise ignored or overlooked.

In The Return of the Repressed Valdine Clemens argues that Gothic tales of horror teach in much the same way as nightmares, by scaring us to our senses. When our conscious mind is afraid of looking at something directly, our unconscious often serves up this undigested piece of our psyche as a ghoulish nightmare. Sitting in the dark at 3:00 a.m. with our heart going like an air hammer, we know we’ve either had a very bad piece of pork or got some unresolved trauma to address. Monster stories mimic this nightmare process, offering up fun-house distortions of the moral and social evils our culture is unable or unwilling to address directly. As Martin Tropp notes in Images of Fear, “the horror story transforms the elements of nightmare to explore the dark side of society and hint at its collective secrets.”

The ghouls in these tales of the macabre are usually metaphors for the real life horrors haunting our daylight hours. Frankenstein’s creature is (among other things) a stand-in for the savage brutalities and injustices of the Industrial Revolution, and Jekyll’s Edward Hyde a symbol of the hypocrisy and cruelty of Victorian sexual mores. A century later the monsters in 1950’s “creature features” gave voice to our unconscious terror about the bomb, while murderous aliens stood in for our cold war paranoia. Like waking nightmares, these monster fictions have been the way we reminded ourselves that all was not well, and they gave us an indirect way to address and exorcize the fears haunting our days. As King notes, these horror stories let us say “in a symbolic way, things we would be afraid to say right out straight.”

The Beast’s Humanity (and Humanity’s Beastliness)

But monster stories, or at least the best of them, do not merely terrify. They are not simply scream fests, scaring us to death with their ghoulish and paranoid visions of the world. They also evoke sympathy, giving us – at least occasionally - the perspective of the monster, unveiling the broken but real humanity of these deformed creatures. As King notes, the enduring power and attraction of a novel like Frankenstein is that we feel both horror and sympathy for the creature. Shelley’s tale has created a reader “who wants to stone the mutation and (a) reader who
feels the stones and cries out at the injustice of it.”

And though monster stories portray their homicidal creatures as gruesome and frightening carriers of moral evil, the beastly outsiders on whose mutant bodies all the ugliness and deformity of sin has been inscribed, these Gothic horrors also point out the arrogance and cruelty of their creators, as well as the brutality and inhumanity of the mobs that taunt and hunt them. For monster stories are also tales about the ways we make monsters of one another, and if these fictions tend to project our monstrosity onto misshapen beasts rampaging about the countryside or lurking in the castle’s dungeon, they also hint at the fact that such fiends are carrying the marks of our own sin and evil. As Judith Halberstam argues in Skin Shows, “the appeal of the Gothic text . . . lies in part in its uncanny power to reveal the mechanisms of monster production. The monster, in its otherworldly form, its supernatural shape, wears the traces of its own construction,” and creator.

Frankenstein’s nameless creature is a homicidal maniac, but Mary Shelley reminds us that he has been made a fiend by the cruelty inflicted on him by his maker and every other human he encountered. If humans are fashioned in the image and likeness of God, this hapless beast is Victor Frankenstein’s Adam and his violence is the fruit of Frankenstein’s malice. So too, Dr. Jekyll’s alter ego, Mr. Hyde, is a brute so morally and physically loathsome that normal people are sickened in his presence, but it is Jekyll’s hypocrisy that has fashioned and formed this ogre. And even if Dracula seems to be a monster for whom no human is responsible, the fact that the Count casts no reflection or shadow suggests that this vampire is but a mirror and shadow of ourselves. Indeed, each of these monsters has been fashioned as an imago hominis, though not a very flattering one.

And this is one reason monster stories with any depth are a fruitful place to go digging for insights into moral evil, because the beasts in these tales are projections of our own inhumanity. Any tale or film with a corpse popping out of a crypt can spook us momentarily, but the Gothic horrors that have frightened audiences for over a century endure because they bear the marks of our most disturbing secrets and sins, because they hold up a dark mirror to our personal
and collective psyches, reflecting back those bits of our soul and society we would prefer not to see.\textsuperscript{16} As Halberstam argues, the abiding attraction of these horrid creatures comes from the fact that their shape-shifting and plastic bodies have been able to take on the imprint of the fears and sins of generations of readers and audiences.\textsuperscript{17} Resurrected time and again, their supple flesh has born the marks of our evolving and unfaced terrors.

These monsters are our doppelgängers, our (morally and physically) deformed doubles.\textsuperscript{18} Their grotesque and misshapen bodies seem at first glance almost unrecognizable in their ugliness and strangeness - this is certainly Victor Frankenstein’s initial reaction to his creature-child. But they have been fashioned of the clay of our human flesh and decorated with stain of our sins. Unlike “the monsters that come before the nineteenth century,” Halberstam notes, Gothic “monsters of modernity are characterized by their proximity to humans.”\textsuperscript{19} They are like us. They are our flip side. Frankenstein’s creature has been assembled by stitching together the organs and limbs of a dozen human corpses. Jekyll’s Hyde is a troll fashioned of the same flesh as his delicate master. And Dracula and his minions are the unburied bodies of humans who have lost their souls. We and their makers may find them repulsive and terrifying, but these creature-children have their parents’ eyes, ears and looks, and wear our vices and inhumanity like tattoos and scars. Like the canvas of Dorian Gray’s portrait, their faces are only unrecognizable to us because they hold the marks of our moral beastliness. As Tropp argues, these “Gothic villains merely acted out latent tendencies of the Gothic heroes.”\textsuperscript{20}

How We Make Monsters

These monsters are also our scapegoats, and a second reason to study such tales is that they uncover our tendency to make monsters of one another, to ignore our shared humanity and sinfulness and demonize one another, to transform the one who is “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” into a fiend. On the surface monster stories are tales about the enemy-stranger, the foreigner, the other, the one who is, thank God, not like us. But these Gothic horrors also reveal humanity’s need to fashion monstrous scapegoats to serve as waste bins for all our failings and transgressions. For in these stories the deformed creatures are forced to carry all the sins and
transgressions of their human creators and persecutors. All the ills and flaws of their human makers are projected onto the grotesque faces and misshapen backs of these beasts of burden, and then they are driven from the village by a lynch mob bent on their expulsion and annihilation.

Clearly the “good” Drs. Frankenstein and Jekyll have projected their own unacknowledged guilt and violence onto the bodies of their monsters, and they and the mobs that hunt these creatures with a mixture of terror and disgust seem blithely unaware of their own culpability and inhumanity. And the Englishmen who stalk and slay Dracula for invading their precious isle under the cover of darkness are surely projecting Britain’s unconscious guilt for having staked out an empire on which the sun never sets.

But it is not just the protagonists and anti-heroes in these tales who have made scapegoats of their monsters. The readers and audiences of these “shilling shockers” have long projected their dread and unease onto the bodies of these beasts. When King tries to name the greatest pleasure of monster stories, he notes that “more than anything else, the horror story or horror movie says it’s okay to join the mob, to become the total tribal being, to destroy the outsider.”

And yet, these very tales that seduce us to play the persecutor and join the lynch mob, that encourage us to throw off the encumbrances of a conscience and heap all our guilt and sins onto the back of these scapegoated monsters, also hold up a mirror to our scapegoating and monster making, catching us in the act and showing us our own monstrosity. As Halberstam notes, the monster story both covers up and uncovers our projections onto these and other beasts. It offers us scapegoats and distractions, but also “reveals the mechanisms of monster production.”

Monster stories, then, which are doubtless a kind of literary beast and which should be devoured with a certain amount of caution, are also a type of morality tale that teaches by frightening us. With spine-tingling effects, these Gothic horrors warn us about what happens to people who violate key moral norms. We either become monsters or we are destroyed by them -
or both. At the same time, monster stories lift up the curtain on our monster making processes, giving us a glimpse at both the humanity of those we call monsters and the inhumanity of such monster production. When we put these two insights together, we discover that the underlying message or moral of monster stories is that making monsters is the worst possible violation of a moral norm, the heart of human darkness, and that when we make monsters we do indeed end up becoming monsters ourselves, and destroying our own humanity. For these monsters are always being fashioned out of our flesh - meaning that we are making monsters of our neighbors and ourselves.  

A Flight from Humanity

And how do we make monsters? What is this monstrous process by which we turn our neighbors and ourselves into beasts? In monster stories in general, and in *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*, and *Dracula* in particular, the sin of monster making is biblical. Like Adam and Eve, the monster-making protagonists in these tales seek to take flight from their humanity, to grasp equality with gods. Among other things, Victor Frankenstein wishes to escape his creaturely status by becoming a creator. Henry Jekyll wants to shake off the bonds of his own flesh and conscience, and Dracula seeks to be free of mortality. And each of these characters makes and becomes a monster in this flight from his humanity.

The lesson in these tales is that we make and become monsters by trying to escape all the limits, burdens and mess of our human experience, by seeking to separate ourselves from creation, our neighbors, our bodies, our affections, and our mortality. For that flight is only possible when we ignore the humanity of our neighbor, when – and here is the central point of these stories - we transform our neighbor into a beast whose hateful flesh bears all the scars and stains of our frail and sinful humanity. For us to be like gods someone else must be a beast. And
in these stories that transformation of the neighbor into a fiend also turns us into something grotesque, some undead creature without compassion or humanity; for we can only escape our humanity by making monsters of ourselves and all those around us.

Making monsters, then, is a process of alienation, of sundering the relationship between ourselves and our humanity, our neighbors, and indeed all of creation. This is, of course, quite similar to Christian theology’s vision of human sinfulness. For while traditional moral theology often described sin primarily as a transgression of God’s laws (for which sinners risked horrific punishments), a richer and more biblical grasp of sin sees it as a fourfold sundering of our relationship with God, creation, our neighbors and our selves. In Genesis 3 the first humans want to “be like God” and end up alienated from their creator, the earth, each other, and their own bodies. And like nineteenth century monster stories, Genesis 4-11 tracks the monstrous violence unleashed by this alienation.

If, then, monster stories are fundamentally tales about our attempt to escape from our own humanity, and the ways in which this flight alienates us from God, creation, our neighbors and ourselves, they would seem to be a very fruitful field in which to explore the face of moral evil, and indeed a useful tool with which to teach about sin. In the rest of this chapter I will examine the three classic Gothic horrors, Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde, and Dracula and look at how they portray the process of making and becoming monsters as a failure to be reconciled with our full humanity and as a sundering of our ties to ourselves, creation and other humans. Then I will suggest some ways these stories could be used to teach about moral evil.

MARY SHELLEY’S FRANKENSTEIN (1819)

Robert Walton, an English explorer whose ship is stranded in the arctic ice, is stunned at the sight of a dog sled pulling “a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic
The next day he and his crew rescue a sick and exhausted European – one Victor Frankenstein – who tells a macabre tale of how he came to pursue the “demon” on the first sled to the ends of the earth.

Born in Geneva, Victor and his brothers Ernest and William had been raised by wealthy and loving parents who had also adopted a foundling girl, Elizabeth. Young Frankenstein flourished in this idyllic household, cherishing and returning the love of his family, particularly Elizabeth, and savoring the companionship of his best friend, Henry Clerval. But at seventeen Victor loses his mother to scarlet fever and the melancholy adolescent abandons family, friends and fiancée Elizabeth for the University of Ingolstadt where he hopes to learn the origin of “the principle of life.”

Over the next four years Victor masters several scientific fields in his quest to “discover the cause of generation and life,” for the young researcher covets the “godlike” knowledge that will permit him to “animate the lifeless clay.” Pursuing a dangerous course of studies that mixes alchemy and science, the increasingly obsessed Frankenstein cuts himself off from all human company, shunning “my fellow creatures as though I was guilty of a crime.” Stalking “nature to her hiding place,” the novice scientist “dabbled among the hallowed damps of the grave . . . (and) collected bones from the charnel houses,” hoping to “bestow animation on lifeless matter . . . (and) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (49-55).

Finally, one dreadful night, Victor brings the creature he has fashioned to life, only to recoil and flee at the sight of his creation. “I had worked for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardor that far succeeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to
endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room” (56).

Abandoning his progeny, Frankenstein collapses into a fever and is bedridden for almost a year. A letter from Elizabeth convinces him to return home, but an early winter delays his trip another year, and by then terrible things are happening. Victor’s father writes that William has been strangled, and that the Frankensteins’ ward, Justine, is to be hanged for the boy’s murder. Terrified that his creature is responsible for this mayhem, Frankenstein rushes to Geneva, but is unable to prevent Justine’s execution. Fleeing into the mountains, he encounters the dreaded monster.

The creature confesses to William’s murder, but accuses Victor and the rest of humanity (which, it turns out, has treated him horribly) of having made him monstrous. “Misery,” he reports, “has made me a fiend . . . Believe me, Frankenstein, I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity.” But “you, my creator, abhor me,” and “your fellow creatures . . . spurn and hate me . . . Shall I not then hate them who abhor me? I will keep no terms with my enemies. I am miserable, and they shall share my wretchedness” (96).

Still, the creature will make peace with Frankenstein and humanity if Victor fashions a mate for him, a “companion of the same species . . . (having) the same defects.” Granted the love and friendship every human and beast desires and needs, he would cease his mayhem. Victor first consents to the creature’s request, but then recants and destroys the monster’s bride. When the creature learns of this betrayal, he swears revenge, promising Frankenstein that “I shall be with you on your wedding-night.” Within days Henry Clerval is murdered, and - true to his word - the creature slays Elizabeth on the night she is wed. Victor’s father dies of a broken heart, and an enraged Frankenstein sets out to destroy the beast he has fashioned, pursuing his “demon” to the top of the planet and into the path of Walton’s arctic expedition.
His tale at an end, the exhausted and dispirited Frankenstein dies. A short time later Walton hears the sounds of what might be “a human voice, only hoarser,” in Frankenstein’s cabin, and comes upon a “form, gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in its proportions . . . Never,” Walton reports, “did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such loathsome yet appalling hideousness” (206). Bent over his creator’s coffin, the repentant and mournful creature laments Frankenstein’s death and his own miserable life, a tale of innocence betrayed and brutalized. Certain no human community will ever receive him, the creature announces his plans for suicide and bounds into the arctic night. Finis.

The Mad Scientist

It is ironic that many who have never read Shelley’s novel think “Frankenstein” is the monster’s name, for Victor is indeed the real monster of this Gothic horror. After all, a monster is not only “an imaginary creature, usually large and frightening, compounded of incongruous elements,” but also “an inhumanly cruel (emphasis added) or wicked person,” and it is Victor Frankenstein’s flight from his own humanity and cruel abandonment of his creature-child that has made monsters of them both.26

The most popular interpretation of Frankenstein’s monstrosity, particularly among those who know the story from films like Boris Karloff’s Frankenstein (1931), is that Victor was a mad scientist. Indeed, many credit Mary Shelley with the invention of both this stereotypical villain and the genre of science fiction. And almost every movie version of her story focuses on this idea.27 In this reading (a major theme in the novel Shelley subtitled “A Modern Prometheus”) Victor Frankenstein’s sin is that of a maniacal scientist with the Faustian dreams of an alchemist, seeking godlike “immortality and power” in his laboratory. His villainy is in rejecting his own creaturely status as caretaker (Gen. 2:15) or co-creator (Gen. 1:28) and aspiring
“to become greater than his nature will allow” (52).

This arrogant flight from his humanity sunders Frankenstein’s relationship to God, nature, other humans, and his own health. For Victor plans to unseat his Creator, becoming lord and master of a new race of Adams. “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (52). And in penetrating “into the recesses of nature” and uncovering “how she works in her hiding-places” he will make nature his laboratory and machine, giving him “new and almost unlimited powers . . . (to) command the thunders of heaven, (and) mimic the earthquake” (47). Like Francis Bacon, he will see creation “forced out of her natural state and squeezed and molded” to fit his purpose.28

This hubris likewise alienates Frankenstein from his fellow humans. Obsessed with creating new life, he cuts himself off completely from the friends and family he professes to love so dearly. Six years pass before he returns to Geneva for a visit, and for most of that time he leaves unanswered a flood of increasingly anxious letters. And as his research progresses he withdraws from his fellow students, preferring the company of cadavers. His creature will complain about lacking a single companion, but Frankenstein too is friendless, and his loneliness is self-made.

Finally, this flight from his humanity has wrecked Frankenstein’s mental, emotional and physical health. His crazed mind is sundered from his heart and body and he is on the brink of total collapse. “I grew alarmed at the wreck I perceived that I had become” (55). And in the end, of course, his pursuit of his creature has killed him.

The Bad Parent

Still, the notion of Frankenstein the mad scientist does not fully explain the moral evil at the heart of Shelley’s horror. Victor Frankenstein is not a monster simply or even primarily
because he has had the hubris to fashion a creature of his own, and his progeny is not evil merely because its birth is a transgression of nature’s laws. Frankenstein is a monster because he has proved to be such a horrible parent, and his creature becomes a monster (homicidal maniac) because he has been cruelly abandoned and abused by the very hand that should have soothed his fevered brow.

Frankenstein wanted to be the creator of a new species and expected that “no father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs” (52). Yet here is what this proud father said on first laying eyes on his child-creature.

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips (56).

Oedipus had warmer parents. Victor Frankenstein, whose mother and father had cherished him with prodigal abandon and welcomed the orphaned Elizabeth and Justine into their home as their own flesh and blood, orphaned, betrayed and demonized his own child, refusing to give his progeny so much as a name. If ever there was an ungrateful debtor, Frankenstein is that monster. The man who would be a god has behaved worse than any beast.

This is the heart of Frankenstein’s sin, his flight from his humanity - he has turned and run from his own flesh. And in doing so he has created a real monster, not just a misshapen
creature, but an inhumanly cruel and wicked person. Indeed he has made two monsters, himself and the child who (figuratively and literally) takes after him. And the rest of humanity has joined him in this monstrous cruelty, for everywhere Frankenstein’s creature turns in hopes of warmth and companionship he meets only inhumanity and brutality. So he becomes the wretch who has “murdered the lovely and the helpless . . . strangled the innocent as they slept and grasped to death his throat who never injured me or any other living thing” (210).

Nor has Frankenstein simply abandoned his creature-child, he has also left his family and friends unprotected, becoming an accessory in their murders. For two years after the creation and disappearance of his “demon” Frankenstein gives little or no thought to any danger he may have put his family in, and sends no warning about the beast he has set loose. And when he decides to break his promise and destroys the creature’s bride-to-be, he leaves friends and family unprotected from the creature’s predictable revenge. Could any but the most narcissistic soul have failed to understand Elizabeth’s peril, or taken fewer measures to protect her?

In Shelley’s tale we make monsters of ourselves and others by fleeing our humanity, which Victor Frankenstein does in part by railing against his creaturely mortality and limits, but mostly by failing to live humanely, by not showing others the same compassion and mercy with which he had been showered as a child.

**ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON’S DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE (1886)**

Stevenson’s monster story begins with an exchange between Mr. Richard Enfield and his cousin Mr. Utterson. On their regular Sunday stroll Enfield points to an odd little building and recounts a bizarre event connected with its door. Very early one morning Enfield witnessed the brutal trampling of a small child by a detestable looking man. Enraged by this cruelty and revolted by something about the man’s carriage or demeanor, Enfield and a small crowd forced
the stranger to make amends, whereupon he entered the doorway in question and returned with a check from a prominent man whom Enfield will not name, but who he believes is being blackmailed by this loathsome fellow. When asked to identify and describe the rogue, Enfield says his name is Edward Hyde and notes that “He is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man so disliked, and yet I scarcely know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, though I couldn’t specify the point” (14).

Utterson, the attorney of Dr. Henry Jekyll, finds this tale deeply disturbing, for his client has just made out a will leaving everything to one Edward Hyde. When the lawyer enquires into this matter he is rebuffed by both Hyde and Jekyll, with the latter demanding that the Utterson honor his wishes.

A year later, however, Hyde savagely murders an elderly gentleman, Sir Danvers Carew, escaping capture. Jekyll brings Utterson Hyde’s signed confession, in which the villain apologizes for having abused the good doctor’s friendship and promises never to return. Shortly thereafter one of Jekyll’s oldest friends, Dr. Lanyon falls ill and dies, leaving Utterson a letter to be opened upon Jekyll’s death. Then, out for another Sunday walk, Enfield and Utterson spot Jekyll looking out his bedroom window. Suddenly a horrible change comes over the doctor’s face and he shuts the window, leaving the two strollers stunned.

Not long after Jekyll’s manservant, Poole, arrives at Utterson’s home seeking help. His master has not left the laboratory for a week, having all his meals sent in and leaving notes commanding Poole to scour London’s pharmacies for some mysterious drug. Convinced that the dreadful Mr. Hyde has murdered his employer and barricaded himself in the laboratory, Poole asks Utterson to return with him. Together they break down the laboratory door, only to discover
the corpse of Edward Hyde, who has just this moment poisoned himself. Jekyll is nowhere to be found. But there is a note from him, instructing Utterson to read Lanyon’s mysterious letter. And there is an enclosure containing the confession of Henry Jekyll.

Back in his office Utterson reads Lanyon’s letter, which describes how Jekyll had once sent Poole to him requesting that he secure some drugs from Jekyll’s own laboratory and how a fearsome stranger had come to Lanyon’s home to claim the drugs. Then, in Lanyon’s presence, the loathsome little man had taken the potion and been transformed into Henry Jekyll. At that point Jekyll confessed that his alter ego was the dreaded murderer Edward Hyde. The shock of this horror sickened and ultimately killed Lanyon.

Now Utterson takes up Jekyll’s “full statement of the case,” which begins with an admission that even as a youth Henry had been so “fond of the respect of the wise and good among my fellowmen” that “I concealed my pleasures . . . (and) stood already committed to a profound duplicity of life” (97). Still, though “so profound a double-dealer,” Jekyll does not think himself a hypocrite, but merely an example of the fact “that man is not truly one, but truly two,” and in time his scientific research offers him a way of escaping this duality by separating himself into two completely different persons (98). In this way the noble self can devote himself to all his good works without being distracted by secret temptations or guilt, while the more savage and evil self could go about wrecking his mayhem without the scruples or remorse of a prodding conscience. This seems like an ideal solution to Jekyll, and so he drinks his potion of salts and becomes the loathsome and malevolent Edward Hyde, who, “alone in the ranks of mankind, was pure evil” (103).

For a while Jekyll enjoys the separate lives he and his monstrous alter ego are able to lead, particularly because this division into two bodies and persons allows him to do whatever he
likes without the recrimination of either society or his conscience. “It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty” (105). But Hyde’s dalliances and vices grow increasingly violent and sadistic, and one morning Jekyll awakens to discover that he has changed into Hyde without taking any potion. Frightened that Hyde’s personality is gaining the upper hand, he decides to quit his experiment, but his resolve soon weakens, and a repressed Edward Hyde explodes with murderous violence, savagely beating an old man to death. Knowing that Hyde would now be executed if he surfaces, Jekyll swears never again to change into the beast. But by now the changes are happening spontaneously, and on one occasion Hyde has Lanyon secure the potion so he can change back to Jekyll. Indeed, Hyde’s personality is so strong now that Jekyll must take his drugs constantly, and the supply is running low. Horrifically he discovers that the original mixture contained impurities that cannot be replicated, and soon he will be unable to change back to Jekyll. When that happens, Hyde will have to kill himself or be executed. Here the confession and life of Henry Jekyll ends. Finis.

“Hyding” from Our Humanity

Like Victor Frankenstein, Henry Jekyll creates and becomes a monster, though in Jekyll’s case he has fashioned this beast of his own flesh and psyche. Even more than Frankenstein’s creature, Edward Hyde is a projection of the evil in his maker’s heart. Indeed, that is all he is, for unlike Shelley’s grotesque giant, Stevenson’s Gothic gnome is not “commingled out of good and evil.” He has no conscience and is not haunted by guilt or remorse. As Jekyll notes, “this familiar that I called out of my own soul . . . was a being inherently malign and villainous; his every act and thought centered on self” (105).

And even more than Frankenstein, Jekyll is the real monster of the Gothic horror that bears his name. For though he protests that it was “Hyde alone, that was guilty,” Jekyll brags that
“I had but to drink the cup to doff at once the body of the noted professor, and to assume, like a thick cloak, that of Edward Hyde” (104). Edward Hyde is Henry Jekyll’s impenetrable mask and errand boy, the hired “bravo” sent to transact his crimes, while his own “person and reputation sat under shelter” (104).

Indeed, unlike Victor Frankenstein, Henry Jekyll is not repulsed by his creature, but enjoys having a monster that can go out in the world and commit all the forbidden, shameful and ultimately savage deeds he aches to perform. When Jekyll first sees Edward Hyde he notes that evil “had left on that body an imprint of deformity and decay. And yet when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather a leap of welcome” (102). And even in his supposed confession to Utterson he boasts that “I was the first that could thus plod in the public eye with a load of genial respectability, and in a moment, like a schoolboy, strip off these lendings and spring headlong into the sea of liberty” (104-5).

And while Frankenstein makes and becomes a monster by trying to be “godlike,” Jekyll hopes to escape his humanity by becoming a demon. For Jekyll will cast off the shackles of his human estate by slaying his conscience and hiding from the conscience of the community. Like all humans, Jekyll has both noble aspirations and disturbing temptations, but the prominent doctor wishes to be free of the guardians summoning him to do good and avoid evil. He desires the respect and esteem granted the virtuous and the license and pleasures seized by the vicious. But he does not wish to pay the price for either choice.

Jekyll plans to escape the bonds of a personal and communal conscience by becoming something diabolical - a divided self, a being utterly sundered and alienated from itself. He seeks a potion transforming him from a human struggling with his demons into a shape-shifting devil who can slip between the lines of good and evil without being detected by his neighbors, his
friends, or his own sleeping conscience. He hopes to be an apparently saintly and undetected sociopath.

This flight from humanity and conscience sunders Jekyll from the community. To achieve his goal he will need to “hyde” himself from all other eyes. He will wear two faces, live two lives, take two names, and dwell in two homes. He will play one role by day and another by night, telling the truth to no one. The prominent Dr. Jekyll will be esteemed by many, and the loathsome Mr. Hyde despised by all. But the diabolical creature with two masks will keep shameful secrets from the public, his servants, and any he falsely calls his friend.

And the more he cuts himself off from the conscience of the community, the more inhuman and alienated he becomes. No longer held in check by others’ good opinion, Jekyll’s shameless alter ego grows increasingly savage and sadistic. “The pleasures which I made haste to seek in my disguise were, as I have said, undignified . . . But in the hands of Edward Hyde, they soon began to turn toward the monstrous” (105). This escalating violence soon severs all bonds between him and the community, as he is transformed into a murderous outlaw, against whom “the hands of all men would be raised to take and slay him” (113).

Jekyll’s diabolical sin has also mortally wounded the ties binding him to his closest friends. He first cuts himself off from Dr. Lanyon and then callously horrifies him with his dark secret, driving his old colleague to an early grave and resulting in this deathbed utterance. “I wish to see or hear no more of Doctor Jekyll . . . Spare me any allusion to one I regard as dead” (54). Jekyll also rebuffs Utterson’s offer to free him of what the lawyer assumes is Hyde’s blackmail. “Jekyll, you know me; I am a man to be trusted. Make a clean breast of this in confidence; and I make no doubt I can get you out of it” (32). But Jekyll is not a man to be trusted, and Utterson will only know this false friend after it is too late.
But Jekyll’s ultimate alienation is from himself. For though he had hoped that escaping his conscience would be liberating, he soon discovers that the beast he has unleashed is constructing a crueler prison than anything he had ever known. In short order Henry Jekyll goes from being Edward Hyde’s master to the loathsome creature’s slave. With every turn Hyde’s power waxes, and Jekyll’s wanes, and soon the dwarfish demon has colonized Jekyll’s flesh completely. In the end Jekyll has disappeared, swallowed up by his beast.

BRAM STOKER’S DRACULA (1897)

Stoker’s Gothic horror begins with the journal entries of Jonathan Harker, an English attorney who has come to a remote and frightening castle in Transylvania to help Count Dracula purchase some real estate in Britain. Like the local peasants, Harker is soon terrified by his host, a nocturnal creature who casts no reflection in mirrors, scales walls like a serpent, and goes rabid at the sight of the young lawyer’s blood. Discovering that he has been imprisoned by a vampire bent on exsanguinating him, Harker attempts to kill the Count, who escapes to England leaving the gravely ill attorney at death’s door.

Back in England Harker’s fiancée, Mina Murray, worries about her missing beau and her dear friend, Lucy Westenra, herself recently engaged to Arthur Holmwood. Not long after a ship bearing fifty boxes of earth for a Count Dracula crashes on the nearby shore, Mina and others begin to find the sleepwalking Lucy sitting on graveyard benches with a dark figure or standing at open windows accompanied by a large bat. In the weeks that follow Lucy, whose neck bears two small red marks, grows weak and sickly, and Dr. John Seward, the director of a local lunatic asylum and one of Lucy’s former suitors, exhausts conventional remedies and turns to his old mentor Dr. Abraham Van Helsing for assistance. When successive transfusions offer only a temporary respite to Lucy’s anemic decline, Van Helsing suggests they are dealing with
something monstrous, not medical, and begins to protect his patient with garlic and other
vampire antidotes. But Dracula overcomes these new defenses and soon Lucy’s wounds are
mortal. Just before dying the now sharp-toothed Lucy tries to bite her betrothed, and Arthur is
only saved by Van Helsing’s quick action.

Soon after Mina, who has gone to Budapest to tend to and wed the ailing Harker, returns
with her new and recovered husband, and with all his knowledge about the vampire now afoot on
English soil. Meanwhile, reports in the village of a phantom woman attacking children by night,
convinces Van Helsing that Dracula has made Lucy one of his “undead” vampires. The only way
to save her soul, he informs Arthur and the others, is to dig up Lucy’s coffin and drive a stake
through her heart. Though resistant, Holmwood, Seward and a third former suitor Quincey
Morris are finally persuaded, and Arthur performs the horrific deed.

Now the foursome is joined by Mina and Harker and the six make a pact to hunt down
and destroy their archfiend. Jonathan sets out to find Dracula’s fifty hiding places, but the
vampire is scattering these boxes of earth around and about the teeming city of London, where
he hopes to find an endless feast of prey. And Mina, who has learned of Dracula’s monstrous
powers from Van Helsing, becomes his next victim and grows steadily weaker. When the others
discover this by breaking in on a horrid scene in which the Count is force-feeding our heroine
mouthfuls of his own blood, Mina makes them promise to kill her before she becomes a vampire
and offers to be hypnotized so that Van Helsing can use her connection to Dracula to discover
his trail. Once Jonathan and the others have uncovered all but one of the boxes, Van Helsing uses
Mina to trace the fleeing vampire as he escapes back to Transylvania. Then, catching the
sleeping Count just before sunset, the party of vampire-hunters rips open his coffin and executes
the red-eyed beast before he can attack them. In an instant Dracula is reduced to dust, Mina
reCOVERs FROM HER VAMPIRE WOUNDS, AND THE DANGER IS OVER. FINIS.

THE BEAST AS SHADOW

Dracula is a very different monster story than Frankenstein or Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde, and its central fiend not at all like the dopplegänger beasts in these other tales. Still, once sorted out, its underlying moral message is strikingly similar - that we make and become monsters by fleeing our own humanity, and that our most monstrous evil is our tendency to project our own sins and failings onto the backs of others.

The first thing we notice about Bram Stoker’s Gothic horror is that there is no mad scientist creating or becoming a beast. In Dracula no human agent is held to blame for the creation of this vampire or any of his minions. It is true that the Count is running around the countryside turning Lucy and others into monstrous Nosferatu (the un-dead), but he is already something alien and inhuman, a member of some foreign and devilish race of beings, and the sin of his creation is lost in the mists of legend (260-261). As Stoker paints him, Count Dracula seems like a monster humanity did not create, a poisonous fruit fallen from some other tree. King writes that while both the other classic monster stories we have examined explore the moral evil “inside” the human heart, this vampire tale deals with some “outside evil,” which comes upon us undeserved, “like a stroke of lightning.”

This gives Dracula a different feel than Frankenstein or Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde. These other Gothic horrors evoke a sense of mournful tragedy, for their monsters are so clearly the fruit of their human makers’ faults and failings. Their beasts are humanity’s hubris and hypocrisy writ large and turned upon itself. And the destruction of these loathsome creatures is also the tragic end of their human creators. But in Dracula a band of brave and innocent mortals hunt down and destroy a murderous beast as different from them as any creature from outer space. They are
unimplicated in his crimes and victorious over him in battle. And so Stoker’s tale reads more like an adventure by Alexander Dumas. The story’s dark landscape and frightening scenes arouse a sense of terror and thrill in us, but not the Gothic noir of Shelley or Stevenson’s tragic tales. And the vampire evokes none of the compassion we might have felt for Frankenstein or his tortured creature or for the hypocritical but all too human Henry Jekyll.

Still, there are clues that this vampire beast has not fallen from the sky like some comet tossed by an angry god. As we noted already, Harker and Van Helsing both tell us that Stoker’s monster casts no shadow or reflection, a hint that he is humanity’s projection and doppelganger (21, 195). We cannot see his shadow because he is ours, which might make readers just a bit concerned about a tale in which we are invited to feel no compassion or sympathy for its beast. Don’t these absences indicate something awry with the story, and with the pleasure we take from reading it? Don’t we condemn Victor Frankenstein for having no pity or fellow-feeling for his creature, and chastise Henry Jekyll for putting all the blame on Hyde? How different is our gleeful pursuit of this beast?

After all, Dracula is just the kind of monster humans create when they try to flee their humanity. Indeed, the vampire is a catalogue of all Frankenstein and Jekyll’s monstrous dreams. Victor wished to create a new species. The Count is creating a race of vampires. Victor wanted “godlike” knowledge and power over nature. The vampire is “more cunning than (any) mortal,” has mastered the alchemy of necromancy and can “direct the elements: the storm, the fog, the thunder . . . (and) can command all the meaner things: the rat, and the owl, and the bat” (193). Frankenstein hoped to infuse “life into an inanimate body,” and “renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (53, 56). Dracula commands the dead to rise and brings fresh color and life to Lucy’s dead flesh, rendering her “more radiantly beautiful than
ever” (163). Jekyll, on the other hand, wished to be a shape-shifter who could escape the prying eyes of neighbors and friends. Stoker’s fiend can take the shape of a wolf or bat, become large or small, appear and disappear at will, turn into a mist and slip under the crack of a door. And Hyde’s creator wanted to be free of his conscience. Van Helsing reports that the vampire “is devil in callous, and the heart of him is not” (193).

In Dracula we come on the scene long after the humans who created this monster have been swallowed up by the monstrosity of their creation, and all we have before us is the full but unrecognized fruits of human evil. Unlike Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde, this tale doesn’t focus on the humans who make the beast, but on the monster that results from our inhumanity. The evil we see in this unburied but hidden monster is not unlike the moral evil of the social sins embedded in our political, economic and cultural structures. Like Dracula, these social sins have been around so long that we no longer remember or recognize our authorship of them. We see them as a fact of nature and conveniently forget our own part in them.

As a result, it is all too easy to assume that we bear no guilt for this beast, and in turn for the moral evil he represents. This oversight allows us, as King reports, to read the monster story as an adventure tale and savor one of the horror stories basest (and most dangerous) pleasures - “to join the mob . . . (and) destroy the outsider.” And so we find ourselves doing the very things we railed against in Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde. We imitate Victor Frankenstein’s self-righteous rage against the monster he has created and Henry Jekyll’s hypocrisy in trying to hold Hyde alone guilty for his sins. It is hard to read Shelley and Stevenson’s novels and not recognize some part of ourselves in their monstrous mortals. The peril of this tale about a slumbering vampire is that we can read it with our conscience asleep at the wheel.
But once we recognize Dracula as our shadow, Stoker’s tale becomes a powerful reminder of how all of us, not just tortured souls like Frankenstein and Jekyll, make and become monsters by projecting our own evil onto the backs and faces of others. The vampire who does not have a reflection holds up a mirror to our own monster-making process and warns us of the perils of joining the mob that hunts down pure evil as if it were an abstraction and not our own shadow. Awakened by this thicker reading of *Dracula*, we find ourselves wondering where else we have enjoyed the dangerous pleasure of making and hunting monsters.

**Teaching with Monsters**

Each of the three novels discussed in this chapter can be used to teach about moral evil. Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* offer the twin advantages of being quite short and exposing the process of making monsters. But Stoker’s *Dracula* provides an opportunity to examine the reader’s unconscious participation in monster-making and could be used to start a discussion on social sin. (For those with very little time, Kenneth Branagh’s 1994 film, *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, captures the moral complexity of the creature and the malice his creator much better than other movie versions.)

I have occasionally invited students to reflect on the origins of moral evil in *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. While it is relatively easy to explain why the creature and Edward Hyde have gone awry, what is the source of Frankenstein and Jekyll’s malice? Victor has enjoyed an idyllic childhood, having grown up in a warm and loving household; and there is nothing to indicate the Henry’s youth was less nurturing. Both are well educated gentlemen physicians, men of science and culture who have suffered no privations or violence. What, then, is the root of the monstrous evil in each of them? Is their sin the fruit of some character flaw unique to each of them, the result of some social evil embedded in their culture, or a tragic
consequence of being human? Not surprisingly, these questions often provoke conversations about original and social sin, and sometimes lead to a discussion of deadly vices like pride. From time to time I ask students to compare/contrast Victor’s fall from grace with that of our first parents in Genesis 3. I have also suggested making a link between Jekyll’s grasp of the divided self and Paul’s description of a similar division in Romans 7:14-25. What do these various texts tell us about the roots of moral evil in the human heart?

In focusing on the monster making or scapegoating process I have asked students to compare the perspectives of Victor and his creature with those of the Pharisee and Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14. How is Victor’s projection of guilt on his creature like/unlike that of the self-righteous Pharisee? And how is the creature’s mournful (and vengeful) confession like/unlike that of the Tax Collector? In a similar fashion I have asked students to compare and contrast the perspectives of Jekyll and Hyde with those of the accusing mob and the woman caught in the act of adultery in John 7:53-8:11. Since neither Hyde nor the woman are ever allowed to speak for themselves, I have occasionally asked students to give voice to these perspectives in a brief essay. I have also asked students to explore the “unacknowledged” sin or sinner in both these stories, asking what Jekyll and the missing adulterer in John’s story have in common, and what social or structural sins allow them to maintain their false innocence. Not a few students have suggested that the scapegoating of Hyde reminded them of how the bodies of women and gays have been forced to bear the marks of a patriarchal society’s sexual sins.

And just how do we engage in monster-making? I ask every class to search the daily paper (especially the editorial page) for examples of the sort of monster-making scapegoating engaged in by Frankenstein and Jekyll. Often enough “monster” language is used to describe violent offenders (especially minors), particularly when the author of the piece is arguing in
support of the use of the death penalty. Not infrequently sexual predators are described as monsters. Since 9/11 and the declaration of a “war on terror” it has been relatively easy to find editorials, letters or cartoons depicting various rulers or regimes as monstrous, and it has not been very hard to locate pieces demonizing or scapegoating foreign or domestic critics of America’s military or economic policies. On one occasion I invited students to imagine Frankenstein’s creature and Jekyll’s Mr. Hyde as terrorists (or at least as people sympathetic to those who use terror against the United States) and to write short pieces explaining their position.

We have also discussed what function monster making serves, how projecting evil onto others makes us feel better about ourselves personally and corporately; but also how this process impedes our ability to feel sympathy or compassion for the stranger, as well as how it interferes with our ability to move to forgiveness and reconciliation. Sometimes, as an antidote, we have read or watched Dead Man Walking, observing the humanity of those who have done monstrous deeds.

Stevenson’s novel also provides an opportunity to examine how our addictions transform us into monsters. Like many a binge drinker, Jekyll uses his potion to escape the restraints of conscience, and then excuses his crimes by holding his drunken alter ego culpable. “It wasn’t me,” the hung over drinker protests. “It was the booze,” as if the effects of intoxication were a complete surprise. But like all addicts, Jekyll’s habit soon overwhelms him, and the beast he has unleashed on others takes over his own life.

Conclusion

Monster stories are parables about the danger of making and becoming monsters by fleeing our humanity and tossing our flaws onto the backs of those who are “bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.” We make and become monsters when we thank God that we are not like
those other folks and stand ready to cast the first stone because we have washed away the stain of our own sin by placing the mark of the beast on our neighbor. Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde and Dracula warn that this is a perilous and self-destructive sport. As Halberstam notes, our monsters are always projected onto our own flesh.

Endnotes


2 Halttunen, Murder Most Foul, 1-6; 241-250.

3 Aside from Kenneth Branagh’s 1994 film, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, most film versions of these novels focus on scaring the audiences out of their senses and downplay the moral vision of the novels.


8 Clemens, The Return of the Repressed, 94-100; Tropp, Images of Fear, 110-118.

10 King, Danse Macabre, 31.

11 Ibid., 59.


16 Tropp, Images of Fear, 5.

17 Halberstam, Skin Shows, 21.

18 Clemens explores the notion of Frankenstein’s creature and Jekyll’s Mr. Hyde as double of their creators in The Return of the Repressed, 100-105 and 124-150. Carol Senf discusses Dracula as a doppelgänger of his British antagonists in Dracula: Between Tradition and Modernism (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 42-45.

19 Halbertam, Skin Shows, 23.

20 Tropp, Images of Fear, 211.

21 King, Danse Macabre, 31.

22 Halberstam, Skin Shows, 34, 106.

23 Ibid., 45, 48.


Kenneth Branagh’s 1994 version of *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* is an exception, focusing on Victor’s cruel abandonment of his innocent creature.


Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 53.


King, *Danse Macabre*, 62-64.

Ibid., 31.